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# *A Mystic Look at Swedenborg*

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BY WILSON VAN DUSEN

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*The doctrines simply are not much use to me unless I know what it is in my own experience that they are talking about.*

—George Dole, from *Messenger* review of *Arcana Coelestia*

*There is the closest relation between the mode of apprehension and the thing apprehended.*

—Gabriel Marcel, from *Creative Fidelity*

## *The Nature of Mysticism*

I use the word *mystic* in its simplest and most basic sense. A mystic is one who experiences God. There are other associated meanings and very complex analyses in religious encyclopedias, but they all rest in this—the experience of God. Some might ask, “Don’t all people experience God?” And I would answer yes, but many are not aware of it. The mystic is aware of it.

Perhaps I need to underline the verb *experience*. It is quite a bit more than simply thinking about God or

addressing God. God becomes manifest, obvious. And by using the present tense, I also mean to imply that the experience tends to be ongoing. Having experienced God once, one acquires a taste for it. The mystic learns how to find his or her way back into that communion.

In this essay I'll cite my own experience merely because it is handy for me, with some reference to the experience of others. My aim is to make the spiritual experience familiar enough to be recognizable to the reader. After establishing this base, we will then see how this is reflected in Swedenborg. The parallel is not simply in the fact that Swedenborg talks about God. Most theological writing concerns God, but most also seems quite flat and unmystical to me. On the other hand, certain music, literature, paintings, and other art forms easily bring me back to the experience of the Divine. The relevance of mystical experience to Swedenborg's own has more to do with a mode of experiencing than with mere content matter.

If someone asked when I first became aware that I was a mystic, I would date it to early adolescence. We lived on the top floor of several flats, and I soon discovered I could climb a ladder to the roof. In the crowded world of San Francisco, I found that the rooftop offered me an expansive private world. The dusk of evening was always the nicest time. Lights were dimming and my thoughts soared. I came back repeatedly to the feeling of the oneness of things. All the city lights, all the dusky shapes, all the sounds were One Life. I knew also I was this One Life looking at and admiring the One Life. The basic feeling was awe or reverence. No matter what the difficulties of



the day, in the evening, under the stars, it was indeed wonder-full.

On the front of the roof was a curved decoration. It was high enough so that I could lean on it and safely look down on the street. I remember lovingly touching the tar paper with awe. The very reality of substance seemed miraculous. I heard the sound of a distant dog bark. I was in such a sense of oneness that it was as though I heard my own life. I remember hearing a screen door squeak and slam shut somewhere; and with that simple sound, I knew the design of creation. I remember swearing to myself that no matter what happens in life, I would always come back to the peace of evening. And, in a real sense, by writing of it, I am back to that peace. I was so awestruck by the wonder of existence. There was also no sense of ego—no me-versus-it. Me and it were one.

*Reverence* is the term that would come to me now to describe the experience, but it would not have then. I had yet to learn that religion and God really existed. My father was an atheist, and my mother disdained all religion, even though she was raised a Catholic. She had had a hard life. She had said many times, "If there was a God, he would be unspeakably horrible." I had heard church services on the radio, but they didn't impress me. The preachers sounded like pompous salesmen, selling the Word instead of cars.

At that time my experience was nameless. I can remember the book that first suggested to me I was not alone, that there were others out there with similar experiences. My first five-cent book purchase was Thomas Troward's

*Edinburgh Lectures in Mental Science.*<sup>1</sup> I was struck by the wonder of money, if it could buy treasures like that. Thomas Troward was a member of the New Thought Movement. For the first time, I saw echoes of my experience in print: "But because the universal personalness is the root of all individual personalities, it finds its highest expression in response to those who realize its personal nature."<sup>2</sup> Yes, that's it. A spiritual moment is immensely personal. I didn't hear any of the religious radio programs say that. "He must realize that the whole process is that of bringing the universal within the grasp of the individual by raising the individual to the level of the universal, and not vice-versa."<sup>3</sup> Yes, yes! So when I see the design of all in the sound of a screen door, it is the universal. Everything I saw, heard, or touched spoke of the universal. It was a great comfort to discover, at last, that I was not alone. Others have realized the same thing.

But, in a way, the experience was frustrating. It was like standing on the edge of a vast sea of mystery, feeling that it was all here, yet I wanted something specific. I'd ask the universal for guidance in my life and then chide it for its lack of specificity. All wasn't enough; I wanted something more!

But the idea of the oneness of all things took firm root. It found countless echoes later, in the ecologist's concern for life, in the universality of humanity, for examples. When I was young one of my favorite fantasies was that I was making speeches to the world on peace and the fellowship of humanity. I had a whole binder of what seemed, at the time, like very inspired lectures. In later years, I burned them as a bit too adolescent to keep. But it



still happens that the theme of the universality of life can easily bring tears to my eyes. It is something I feel so strongly that my reason has to stand aside. I know I'm I and you're you and that much separates and distinguishes us. But that's the job of reason, to cut things up and set them apart. It doesn't matter. I've experienced the oneness of All. It became apparent to me that life could either be taken apart or experienced as a one. The experience of oneness was the more fundamental, satisfying, and powerful. It was the truth. All this taking apart is secondary, flat, and trivial in comparison.

You might wonder what the mystical experience does to personal identity. Sensing the All, would I not be greater than most who don't do this? Not in the least. Sensing the All, I am the equal of all—the equal of tar paper, a dog's bark, and stars. I would say the experience relaxes the personal identity down to the point where it doesn't matter. Later I was impressed by the Greek expression *En to Pan*, "the One is the All."

Over the years, it gradually dawned on me that my experience was religious and that the Universal One was another name for God. You see, I had these kinds of experiences before names, even before speech or words. Though I began this essay with an account from adolescence, I can recall an experience all the way back in infancy, when I was still in a crib, possibly around the age of one. I lay there with my head turned to the side. Sunlight was streaming through the window. Motes of dust floated and turned in the beam of sunlight. Fixing on them, I saw endless rainbows of color. The feeling was of ecstasy and awe. Later I learned in my study of psychoanalysis that this

identification with everything is common in children—that it was a childish quality I'd apparently failed to out-grow! Be that as it may, I found the roots of mystical experience can exist before words, concepts, religious training, before all the obscuring machinations of the world. I suspect these experiential roots are pretty much universal; they occur in all people. But in various ways our education and acculturation can obscure them. The center can be forgotten.

In some way, my memory was turned around. My experience of the All became my foundation. Later, people were surprised when I said I could far more easily doubt my own existence than I could doubt God's. My own existence seems variable, hard to grasp, doubtful, and really trivial. The All is everything. Perhaps by some bit of luck (another term is *God's grace*), I retained the memory of what others also knew and misplaced or forgot. In some way, I feel obliged to describe the mystical experience so that others may recover it. So here I will describe my adult way of returning to it, which may also work for you. I've been in and out of mystical experiences so often that it has finally become clear how to find my way back. It can be done anywhere, at any time. But there are certain necessities. I cannot be rushed nor in pain. The mood is one of no hurry, endless time. I feel very open. I'll accept whatever is given. It is the opposite of making demands on God. The mood is one of openness and play. Just for the fun, I feel like stopping here and admiring the flowers. Long ago I discovered it is the heart of aesthetic experience. How best to appreciate what is before you but by stopping, looking, being open to what is suggested?



I had a group of alcoholic women contend that this could not be done within the bare walls of an institution. So I had them dwell intensely on the floor. One noticed a crack in the cement; and, in describing what it suggested to her, she came to a tearful description of her life pattern. Everything reveals if we are patient with it.

The whole of existence is like looking at a painting. I am regarding Van Gogh's second self-portrait. At first, I take in the obvious details: his face is angular and bearded; his clothes are rude, those of a peasant; the blue background swirls around his head with areas of chaos. There's a remarkable, quiet intensity in the face. Though closed-mouthed and mute, the intensity is almost wild, brooding. And this is the center of the man. He has painted his very nature. I empathize with the power of his struggle. In the mystical mood, I allow all there is to speak, to affect me. If I had to train mystics, I would certainly consider using art appreciation as a first step. For in it is the foundation of letting things reveal themselves to you.

But you may say this is merely aesthetic and not religious. The aesthetic is a step into the doorway of the religious. Its basic attitude is one of appreciation. It leads to awe and respect. It is the practice of openness to what is here. Like the aesthetic person, the mystic is in an appreciation of things as they are. This moment is perfect. It is all here, all there is.

There is a tremendous nowness to the mystical experience. It is as though all there ever was passes through this present into all there ever will be. One rests in such a moment. Questions have no place. Doubts are absent. Here, thus, it is. I once asked God for a sign of his existence. God



answers in direct knowing, beyond words. His answer was, in effect, "Is not the whole of existence sign enough?" Well, yes, that's a pretty good one: existence—yes, I'd call that a substantial sign!

My existence is among these signs. So sometimes I just look at and admire my hand. Interesting form. Skin a little wrinkled because I'm aging. A real marvel how it is animated. Look at it writing here. Marvelous. I wonder what words are and how my hand works. I am mystery, looking at mystery, appreciating mystery. The very essence of mystical experience is to appreciate this fully—what is. Does it plague me that I am a mystery? No. I appreciate it. How far this is from egotism or Swedenborg's term *proprium*. No egotism, because I know beyond my understanding that the same life animates the pine tree in my backyard that animates me. What a delightfully pervasive mystery. What an honor to be an equal to pine trees, grass, and clouds.

I've described the mood and attitude that leads to mystical experience—taking the time to be open and thoroughly appreciate what is before you. But there are also deeper hallmarks of the mystical experience. Meaning is given, *noetic*. You suddenly realize something that is prior to thought, before any reasoning. You might just *know* that God is present. If someone asks how or where, you would have nothing to point to. This knowing can vary from a gentle suggestion to an absolute certainty. Outside that experience the subject himself can doubt it. "Was God really present?" But during the noetic givenness of knowing, doubt or questioning is not possible. I've even formulated my biggest questions and written them down, only to find my own sheet of questions rather ridiculous

during the experience of God. One of the reasons I've written for many years and barely said anything of this experience is that it is sacred and beyond doubt.

I recall a woman who had a sudden, unexpected experience of God, lasting probably less than five seconds. She described it to a nun, who remarked, "You probably just had a digestive upset." The woman spent decades studying mysticism and trying to return to the experience; but, after the nun's rejection, she rarely told anyone of it. She now trains priests in the deeper aspects of religious experience. The mystical experience is so characterized by direct knowing that I'd call into question an experience where God talks aloud to a person.

The experience is up through the core of one's being. Words are not necessary. I once saw an angelic figure with wings crossed in front as though to conceal something. I wondered what was concealed. Suddenly, the answer came flooding in, but not in words. I was just given to know. The hidden secret was that there is no death. Nowhere in the whole of existence is there death. You are struck with not only the words but also the full ramifications of them. People think of death as real. The angel revealed the deeper truth; no one ever dies. And like waves and ripples the full ramifications play on the consciousness. In Raymond Moody's cases of people who "died" on the operating table and later were revived, many reported meeting a radiant figure who communicated by direct mind-to-mind knowing.<sup>4</sup> A parallel in ordinary experience is the way lovers sense so much before anything is said. In sharp contrast, when people who are hallucinating meet demons of hell, they talk endlessly but they say little! The more powerful the feeling that goes with direct



knowing, the more I'd suspect it is just plain truth. Often in these experiences symbols are given, and, at the same time, the meanings of the symbols are given. A meaning can be so nonverbal that the person receiving it may have difficulty putting it into words. In these cases, I'd say it is therapeutic and useful to draw what was seen and attempt to extract and put into words all the information. Otherwise, the ordinary consciousness may later look at what was given and translate it into something much less significant than it was at the time (e.g., "I saw an angel and I guess it meant so and so"). But going back to the experience, one finds it packed with meaning. I was once given a simple hand gesture of two fingers extended and its meaning. I was thrilled years later to see it in an old painting in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

William James writes about the noetic:

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to also be states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime.<sup>5</sup>

William James also describes the mystical experience as "ineffable," or impossible to describe in words. I would not go so far as to say this. With care, one can describe the state. It's just that one can't fully convey the state in words



because, as he says, it is more like states of feeling than of intellect.

### *The Several Paths Are One Path*

Having experienced a remarkable state, I was naturally curious to look at what the world's literature had to say of it. There are a number of scholarly compilations—collections and commentaries on what mystics have to say. Other than a few touching quotes from real mystics, these commentaries fall quite flat for me. Those writing them often draw conclusions that are just untrue, possibly because they haven't had the experience. They also tend to make a basically simple and direct experience quite complex, constructing stages, and stages within stages of the experience. Yet the real experience is terribly simple and straightforward.

In great contrast, the work of actual mystics often soars for me. Among these I'd list Plotinus, Khalil Gibran, Saint Theresa of Lisieux, Jakob Böhme, the Zen Buddhists, some Hindu works, and Omar Khayyam. Notice that this listing ranges across several religions. Mystics are dealing with universal truth revealed in most, and perhaps all, religions. Even though the content of these authors seems different—Gibran is in verse; Saint Theresa describes her relationship to Christ; Plotinus the Greek, like Jakob Böhme, presents a soaring intellectual understanding—they have the power of one who has been there.

In my experience, mystics have no difficulty recognizing other mystics. Because their eye is on the universal,

they see beyond historical and doctrinal differences. I've often been asked by individuals whether their experience of God was true. Let me cite an unusual case to illustrate the process. I was at a Christian church gathering at a camp in the mountains. A minister's wife indicated she wanted to speak to me. As a practiced clinical psychologist, I could see that great feeling was involved. She hesitated to speak. Finally, I got her to tell her story.

One day a friend came to see her, bearing the message that her deceased father loved her. Suddenly, the situation opened up for her. She knew beyond doubt that this man, in the body of a known friend, was actually God, and God came to repair the relationship with her father. She had been emotionally alienated from her father. She asked me if this was a true experience of God, even though inwardly she knew beyond doubt it was. I felt a tremendous impact in her story. We both struggled unsuccessfully with tears. My response was that her story had the ring of truth to it, though I had never before seen the form of her experience—God coming in the body of a friend. God is able to come in any form, even the form of a friend. The incident essentially did good: it brought her into loving relationship with her father.

The woman's story had all of the hallmarks I look for in a genuine experience of God. The people hesitate to speak. What they have to say is powerfully sacred to them. It is the opposite of bragging: they would rather say nothing happened than to have the sacred rejected. The experience is linked to powerful feeling, which indicates to me that it comes from beyond mere intellect, from beyond the manipulations of consciousness. It is as though the very source of life is touched and shaken. Finally, I ask



whether the experience does good. If so, I believe it is from God. I affirmed, as she already inwardly felt, that the experience was quite genuine.

What you often find, as was true of her, is that the mystical experience can be so powerful and otherworldly that the subject is somewhat at a loss as to what to do with it. I saw she was having difficulty integrating the experience. She said she went to the bishop of her church afterward, and he so discredited the experience that she swore to herself never to speak again of religious feeling in church! I took the opposite tack. Given that God was trying to repair the bond between her and her father, I asked that she prayerfully dwell on the love between them. I reinforce the trend in the experience. I try to act in concert with the tendencies shown by God. Countless bishops and psychotherapists could not kill the inner life of her experience. But in a few moments, I could strike a sentient chord merely by recognizing and reinforcing the quality of the experience given her.

I relate this incident to illustrate several things. I believe mystics can easily see and empathize with genuine experience in others, regardless of religious differences, no matter how unusual the form. I also think it something of a crime for someone to invalidate the depth of experience in others. It would have been far better if the bishop had said, "I don't know if your experience was really of God," for actually he didn't know.

Would I call this woman a mystic? Potentially, yes. She had had only one experience, but treating this one in a positive way would encourage her to open to others. She was just at the entrance of the house; she had yet to move in and become comfortable in the house. This woman's



story also illustrates that the mystical experience is not totally ineffable, beyond description. Difficult to convey, yes; impossible, no. Moreover, in attempting to do so, others who hear of it might rethink their own sacred experiences and renew their belief in the wonders that have been given to them.

Follow, if you will, a fantasy of mine. Suppose I am able to encourage many people to describe their sacred experiences. I compile and publish a newsletter of these, and we convene to discuss them. In these meetings, the mood is one of acceptance of and respect for even the tiniest traces of sacredness in each other's experience. Because one describes, others recognize similar experiences in themselves. Because we accept and express and share these, new experiences arise and are shared. Mystical experience becomes common, and we are able to explore the length and breadth of it. A fantasy? Not entirely.

I've seen Teen Challenge sessions in which a similar situation occurred. All of the members present had been drug addicts picked up while down and out on the street. Because the group had expectations that the experience of Christ would occur, it did frequently. I recall one addict saying he watched in amazement as his hands poured heroin down the toilet. In that moment, he knew that Christ controlled him.

I have also seen Teen Challenge members speak to religious groups and frighten them. Most people's experience of religion is cool, rational, controlled. These people really believe, and they frighten people of a cool religion. For a similar reason, in the history of mysticism, it was fairly common for mystics to write anonymously (as did Swedenborg at first) or to come into conflict with the

church (Teilhard de Chardin), or to write their experiences in a partly disguised form (*The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam).

So, let me alter my fantasy above. Only mystics (of any religion) may enter our circle, and we share with each other only. But the underlying theme of my fantasy is that we share and respect experiences of God and thereby encourage others to recognize it in their life. In this day and age, I find that what is missing from and repressed in many people's lives is the sacred, not sexuality, as some maintain.

Why? At first, one might suggest we tend to hold back a sacred experience because we don't want others to scoff at it. The bishop's put-down of the woman discussed previously is a good example. The experience is particularly delicate if one has had only one or a few experiences. This is a partial reason for repressing the sacred. But there is another reason that has to do with the inward nature of the experience. What opens up in the person is the deepest root of life itself. It is one's life. Would we hand a scalpel to a passing stranger to perform surgery on us? The experience is our life, our very life. It often repels even the skeptical probing of the subjects themselves. That is, the experience can seem alien and incredible to even the person who has it. There is a great difference between the person who is moved in one sacred moment and the same person in the workaday world. In the light of day, that transcendent experience can be questioned and doubted by the subject who had it. Did it really happen? Was that God or digestive upset? It is uncomfortable to doubt it. It is like pinching oneself unnecessarily. So an uneasy peace settles.



I believe that, in the most inward sense, there is a natural protection around the sacred. At the very worst, the experience will totally disappear from memory rather than leave the sacred to be permanently questioned. So the barriers to assault on it are both internal and external. I don't want it to be laughed at, so I won't tell others. It is somehow wrong even for me to question it, so I'll not do so. It takes respect for the sacred by one person to open it up to expression in another. The woman who reacted to the bishop's put-down wasn't simply a petulant woman. The sacred protects itself, so she resolved never to expose real religious feeling in church again. I don't fully understand how the sacred protects itself. But I suspect that, if we could see its full ramifications, we'd be surprised at its artful, in-depth protection. I am so convinced that the sacred is the very root and source of life itself that I'm sure some have died rather than expose it (e.g., the early Christian martyrs). The doubts of others are rather easy to fend off: simply keep quiet about it. Internal doubt is another matter.

I would not be at all surprised to learn that one day madness itself comes from turning against the early budding of mystical experience in a person. Why do I say this? Because, in madness, I often see a strange tangle of essentially religious elements turned back on itself. It would be better not to have the experience of God than to harm it in any way. At the very least, the person who has it would be better off to leave the possibility of its reality open and seek out its possible good than to turn away.

There are several other hallmarks of the mystical experience. One is a strong sense of the familiar, no matter how unusual the outer situation. Once I was watching a



play. An actor said, "I've returned as I promised." Suddenly, the play opened up. I felt that God spoke through the actor, and I was in tears that God had returned. I've walked in ruined churches that I'd not seen before and suddenly had an overwhelming feeling of the familiar. In the ruins of a monks' abbey, I was suddenly familiar with the monks and their devoted labor of building the church. Sometimes when interviewing a person, it also occurs that, suddenly, again, there is the familiar God in them. The feeling is very pleasant, like coming home after a long trip. It often comes to me when I'm with people talking about sharing with others or about universal humanity. The full mystical experience leaves a very broad signature on the inner life that then finds itself expressed in many ways. The sense of familiarity is so consistent that I would question whether the experience of *deja vu* might not be a part of mysticism. I would encourage those with *deja vu* to reflect deeply on what they recognize in the experience. Try to bring up and examine all the feelings. It may be a tiny precursor to the mystical. I was once talking to a neurotic woman. There was something in her very preened formality. Suddenly, I felt the essence of Egyptian religion. It is difficult to describe, but it has to do with reaching and preserving the contact with the Eternal. The changeless is close to the sacred—so it was necessary to preserve the body. A religion that seemed foreign to me was suddenly familiar. It revered the changeless, which is an approach to the Eternal.

There is another aspect of the mystical experience that seems to be consistently misunderstood. It is as though we must die to ourselves in order to see God. This leads to all sorts of efforts to overcome the self. This is an impossible

paradox, for the one struggling against the self turns out to be simply the self. In a way, the self is actually intensified by the effort to get rid of it. The truth is that in a mystical experience there is an expansion of the self—quite the opposite. It is as though God is always present and is the root and source of our very life. God need only expand our awareness to come into consciousness. The relaxed openness is part of allowing this to happen, allowing the source to speak. The love of God calls forth the experience.

There is another related problem. I've wondered if I should tell you of my great visions. Readers might compare their little visions to my great ones and conclude that they have not yet reached the same level. This is a kind of spiritual nonsense. Like Swedenborg,<sup>6</sup> we become disappointed if our vision doesn't knock us clear out of bed. It is the doubting little self that demands miracles, lightning to strike this very instant. What is wrong is that this competitive race for the biggest vision overlooks all the tiny ones. It is loving appreciation of the tiny ones that may (God willing) prepare us for a bigger vision. A key to understanding here is that we really can't (repeat, *can't*) make God come give us a giant experience. This is a presumption against the very nature of the spiritual. Learn to appreciate the absolute wonder that you already have. We breathe, don't we? Isn't it a marvelous process that we take in and expel the world regularly, whether we think of it or not? I wonder if there is meaning beyond oxygenating the blood. The Hindus have described a way to God that includes principally focusing on breathing. Earlier I described a mystical experience in simply looking at and wondering at the life that cleverly moves my hands, I know not how. Looking at and enjoying the wonder of nature is



a universal experience of humankind. Beware of asking God for big visions, just to prove he exists. Having had one vision, you may tend to doubt it and ask for one more bigger one, and so on. Finally, you will die; and it is hoped that the vision you have then will at last be big enough!

Both the effort to overcome the self and the demand for big visions are common spiritual traps. God comes by expanding your present awareness. Learn to see the miracles here all the time. The very essence of the mystical experience is to appreciate what is here now. That is becoming a child again—finding amazingly beautiful something as small as a dried-up leaf that fell from a tree.

Some may conclude that the mystical can be sensed in the beautiful things in life (i.e., nature) but not in the ugly things. Not so. I have reflected on rubbish and garbage heaps and found wonders in them. Some put a big boundary between the things made by God (i.e., nature) and those made by human beings. In this dichotomy, human creations are low and nature's high. This seems foolish to me. I am so aware that God designed the people who make things, that I am most anxious to watch science's discoveries and the unfolding of clever electronic gadgets. If you look for God, he may be found anywhere.

It would be fair to ask what the mystic ultimately discovers. Swedenborg's writings contain some of the better descriptions.

### *Swedenborg's Mysticism*

I cannot but open up those things of the Word that are called mystical, that is, its interior things. . . .

(*Arcana Coelestia* 4923)



It came as a considerable surprise to me to learn that there is a tradition among students of Swedenborg's religious writings that Swedenborg is not a mystic. It is only too apparent to a mystic that his works are a major contribution to this literature, and mystics have freely referred to him as one of their own. Swedenborg's spiritual writings define mysticism in a way that inescapably makes Swedenborg a mystic. How is it, then, that some of his followers say, with earnest conviction, that he is not a mystic? We will look at what mysticism precisely is and how this error arose. We will also see how his religious works define mysticism and how this compares with the current accepted meaning. This is not a mere quibble over a term. At its least, it implies a misunderstanding of mysticism. At its worst, it may involve a misunderstanding of the very nature of Swedenborg's writings themselves.

The definition of mysticism has two conflicting currents. One, which we will call the scholarly definition, reflects the actual experience of mystics. The other, which we will call the layperson's definition, stands outside the experience and basically says it doesn't make sense. This confusion of opposing definitions is quite old and extends back before Swedenborg's time. Many dictionaries will reflect both views. The core of the scholarly definitions is the experience of union with the Divine. The core of the layperson's definitions is whatever is occult, mysterious, unclear, or involved with spirits.

Followers who use the layperson's definition are more than happy to say Swedenborg wasn't interested in the occult, which is true, and hence not a mystic. The very rationality and clarity of his spiritual writings would seem to militate against their being mystical. Let us look at the dic-

tionary definitions. The closer the dictionary is to the popular mind, the more likely it will reflect the unprofessional layperson's definition as well as the scholarly. Scholarly religious dictionaries tend to drop the popular misconception altogether and deal only with the real internal meaning of the experience. The following reflects more of the popular misconception:

Mystical. 1. mystic; occult 2. of or pertaining to mystics or mysticism: mystical writings. 3. spiritually symbolic. 4. rare: obscure in meaning; mysterious.<sup>7</sup>

Swedenborg's own definition was the third one above—"spiritually symbolic." This same dictionary, reflecting the popular conception, says of the word *mystic*: "known only to the initiated; of occult power or significance; of obscure or mysterious character . . ." It is from this aspect that followers of Swedenborg's religious writings wanted to dissociate themselves, for these works are eminently rational and clear. Another dictionary almost overlooks this popular misconception:

Mystical. 1: having a spiritual meaning or reality, or the like, neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence; symbolical; as, the church is the mystical body of Christ. 2: of, resulting from, or manifesting an individual's direct communion with God, through contemplation, vision, an inner light, or the like; as, mystical rapture. 3. now rare: unintelligible; cryptic.<sup>8</sup>

Notice that the definitions "obscure in meaning, mysterious" and "cryptic" are now seen as rare.

It is through communion with the Divine that direct spiritual understanding is given, which is often symbolic



and difficult to translate into ordinary terms for others. The difficulty of conveying the internal experience to others has made it seem obscure to outsiders. Then, to add to the confusion, there have been the pseudomystics who use the term for self-aggrandizement, as though to say, "This is mystical and too deep for your understanding, but, of course, I understand it!"

The very authoritative *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* goes to the heart of the matter:

Mysticism. "Mysticism," in common speech-usage, is a word of very uncertain connotation. It has in recent times been used as an equivalent for two characteristically different German words: *Mystizismus*, which stands for the cult of the supernatural, for theosophical pursuits, for a spiritualistic exploitation of physical research; and *Mystik*, which stands for immediate experience of a divine-human intercourse and relationship. The word "mysticism" has, furthermore, been commonly used to cover both (1) the first-hand experience of direct intercourse with God and (2) the theologico-metaphysical doctrine of the soul's possible union with Absolute Reality, i.e., with God. It would be conducive to clarity to restrict the word "mysticism" to the latter significance, namely, as an equivalent for the German word *Mystik* and as designating the historic doctrine of the relationship and potential union of the human soul with Ultimate Reality, and to use the term "mystical experience" for direct intercourse with God.

First-hand, or mystical, experience is primarily a psychological question; the doctrine of mysticism is essentially a metaphysical problem. Mystical experience is as old as humanity, is not confined to any one racial

stock, is undoubtedly one of the original grounds of personal religion, and does not stand or fall with the truth or falsity of the metaphysically formulated doctrine of mysticism. Mystical experience is marked by the emergence of a type of consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

The more than twenty pages of tiny print make no further reference to the layperson's definition. In spite of what the author, Rufus Jones, a noted scholar of mysticism, would like to see, the term *mysticism* is used most often for the experience. The literature on the qualities of the experience is vast; that on the doctrinal aspects is relatively scant. In fact Swedenborg's spiritual writings are an unusual combination of the experiential and the doctrinal aspects of mysticism. In brief, then, the most accepted definition of mysticism refers to all aspects of the experience of conjunction or union with the Divine and, secondarily, to doctrines about this. This is the sense in which I use the term.

It is relatively easy to demonstrate that all those who have said Swedenborg was not a mystic used the now-rare and not really acceptable layperson's definition. None of them was trying to say that his writings do not deal with the experience of the Divine—the core of the accepted meaning of mysticism. My sources are not complete, but a couple of references will illustrate the point.

Herbert C. Small in 1929 did one of the more impressive antimystical articles. A few quotes will show he is using the layperson's definition: "Mysticism is the main cause of all religious superstition and phantasy. . . . These experiences run the entire gamut of magic, spiritism, occultism, Holy Ghostism, theosophy . . . and what not. . . . [Swedenborg] sought no occult source, and employed



none."<sup>10</sup> Small's complete argument can't be put down so easily. Basically, he says that mystics are led by their own intuition, which becomes an authority higher than the Word. This is simply not true. There are countless mystics who revere the Word because they have experienced something of its inner sense. But his is the view of the one outside the experience. Indeed, he feels those who have the experience are incompetent to judge it; only one outside it can be a proper judge: "It is quite useless in most cases to rely on definitions of mysticism as given by its devotees, for they have no knowledge of its true nature."<sup>11</sup> Standing outside the experience, he links it to all excesses of self leading and falling into occult and mysterious falsities. If, for his use of the term, one substitutes the now-accepted meaning of the term—the experience of the Divine—then all his arguments would fail; for he could not say the one who has no experience of the Divine is better able to judge the worth of the experience than one who *has known* God. There would be no linking to "spiritism," for the experience of God is not the experience of spirits. He emphasized Swedenborg the scientist, collecting and analyzing facts; but he had to admit Swedenborg was led of the Lord, which is precisely what the now-accepted definition of mysticism means.

In a recent example, Brian Kingslake also disclaims Swedenborg as a mystic.<sup>12</sup> Though he finds many similarities between Swedenborg's life and that of other prominent mystics, he sees a difference in that Swedenborg's religious works are rational. Mysticism is nonrational; this is again from the layperson's definition. As a matter of fact, mystical writings vary across the whole spectrum of clarity and rationality. Basically, mysticism, or the experi-

ence of God, is irrational to those outside the experience. It is rational, true, and clear to those in the experience. It informs reason of higher truths. If Swedenborg had not clarified his experience beyond the *Spiritual Diary*, he would appear to have been very irrational. The experience of God makes a higher sense. Seen in the whole of the world's mystical literature, Swedenborg's spiritual writings are perhaps near average for clarity or rationality. When you go to the heart of the meaning of mysticism—the experience of God—and substitute this for the word *mysticism*, then most of the arguments that Swedenborg was no mystic fall. He obviously had much experience of God and tried to teach us of this, which is precisely what being a mystic means. Some will find it clear and rational, and others will not. The closer one is to a similar experience of the Divine, the clearer and more rational these works of Swedenborg will seem. For example, by comparison, Christ's teachings are perhaps even clearer and much of Böhme's works less clear.

The only perceptive use of mysticism I was able to find in the collateral literature was in Marguerite Block's conclusion to her historical survey. Two quotes might entice some readers to review the whole chapter:

The New Church in general has ignored the mystical side of religion, though it is absolutely inherent in the doctrine of influx—the entrance of God into the individual soul, as well as in the doctrine of perception, or interior reception of spiritual truth.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps after all the issue in the New Church is not the simple and obvious one between “fundamentalism” and “modernism,” but the more ancient one between



literalism and mysticism which has appeared in almost all the world's religions at various times.<sup>14</sup>

I suspect Block has her finger on the difficulty. I fear that there are natural and fundamentally different approaches to reality and human experience reflected in her literalism versus mysticism, that, even if Swedenborg were a classic mystic, the literalists would not be able to discover this. But this is another whole large issue, whether any amount of doctrine can ever get us to break out of the shell of our inherent approach to reality.

The following will clarify the contrasting definitions of mysticism:

#### MYSTICISM

*The outsider's position,  
layperson's rare meaning*

*The inside experience,  
scholarly accepted definition*

Being led by every  
emotional whim

Being led by God

Concerned with spirits  
and other powers

Concerned with God  
alone

Irrational and mysterious

Rational, a higher under-  
standing

Seen as contrary to the  
authority of Swedenborg's  
religious writings

Seen as reinforcing the  
authority of Swedenborg's  
religious writings

Each is a law unto himself

God rules all

What do Swedenborg's religious writings themselves say of mysticism? It is disturbing to me to think of all those who claim to stand on the authority of his writings and

choose to overlook what they say of mysticism. Swedenborg uses the term "mystical" (*mysticus*) rarely, only fourteen times that I count in his work. In the Latin, it means what is hidden or secret. He uses it in several related senses, which include both the layperson's and the scholarly uses.

Sometimes he uses it to disparage the pretentiously obscure (*Arcana Coelestia* 5223, 7296) or the irrational, such as the mystic dogma of the trinity (*True Christian Religion* 169) or when he refers to the mystical and enigmatical faith of present-day theology (*True Christian Religion* 351).

At other times, he uses it to mean the sacred that is not understood and appreciated and, hence, rejected. Speaking of the science of representations and correspondences, which is often rejected, he writes:

Hardly anyone is willing to believe that it exists, and they who do believe this, merely called it something mystical that is of no use.

(*Arcana Coelestia* 2763)

And if what is internal or spiritual is merely mentioned, they either ridicule it or call it mystical; consequently, all conjunction between them is broken, and when this is broken, the spiritual man suffers grievously among the merely natural.

(*Arcana Coelestia* 5022)

But what is meant thereby, Christianity (now-a-days) does not enquire because it places the celestial and spiritual things of the Word in its literal sense, and calls its interior things mystical for which it does not care.

(*Arcana Coelestia* 9688)



But these are his peripheral uses of the word *mystical*. In his strongest and most unambiguous uses, he refers to the interior spiritual and celestial sense of the Word. Note the power of these statements:

I cannot but open up to those things of the Word that are called mystical, that is, its interior things, which are the spiritual and celestial things of the Lord's kingdom.

(*Arcana Coelestia* 4923)

The mystical things which some seek in the Word, are nothing else than the spiritual and celestial senses.

(*The Word of the Lord from Experience* 21)

The arcana of wisdom of the three heavens contained in [the Word] are the mystical things of which many have spoken.

(*Apocalypse Explained* 1079)

"I am in the Father, and the Father in Me." This is the mystical union of which many speak.

(*Arcana Coelestia* 2004)

Paragraph 4923 of *Arcana Coelestia* is worth reading in its entirety. Very clearly Swedenborg says the holy and the mystical that many felt existed in the Word, and for which they search, is nothing other than the interior of the Word, which he describes.

Does Swedenborg's definition of the mystical as the internal of the Word accord with the present-day scholarly definition? It is fully in accord if you are careful of what is meant. If one said "the experience of the internal sense," then there would be no doubt. The internal of the Word is the

life of God. Experience of this internal sense is the experience of the Divine. I make this proviso so that one does not mistakenly think a mere knowledge of this internal sense brings one into the spiritual and celestial, which is the internal of the Bible. Some kind of living involvement in the internal sense is necessary, and involvement that leads to uses and charity. To me, one of my more significant discoveries was the way Swedenborg personally invested himself in his study of the Bible.<sup>15</sup> This went beyond "knowledge of" to entering into the "life of" the internal. If one is thinking of a living participation in the internal sense of the Word, then Swedenborg's definition of the mystical accords with the modern scholarly meaning of mysticism. Can we then say that the person who "cannot but open up those things of the Word that are called mystical" is not a mystic?

There is a larger sense in which Swedenborg was clearly a mystic, a sense that breaks out of the limitations of a single word he actually didn't use very often. In the accepted positive scholarly sense, the mystic is simply one who has direct experience of the Divine. I doubt that any follower of Swedenborg's spiritual writings would say Swedenborg did not have direct experience of the Divine. Then, he *was* a mystic. Mystics who write attempt to share their experience and its subsequent understandings with others. Contrary to the ideas of some that mysticism is irrational, most mystics who have written have produced quite rational works. In only a few places did Swedenborg say it was more than could be told or that it was not permitted yet to reveal. He made an eminent attempt to convey his direct experience and his consequent understandings. Have other mystics attempted to make as clear or rational a presentation? Indeed, yes. To those who want to pursue



further the positive side of mysticism, I recommend the works of Evelyn Underhill, especially her *Practical Mysticism*.<sup>16</sup> Her big volume *Mysticism*<sup>17</sup> leads one to the larger body of world literature on the subject.

Is there more mysticism in Swedenborg's religious writings than one man sharing his experience and findings of the Divine? I believe so, but this point cannot be proven in a limited space. If the mysticism of his writing lies preeminently in the internal sense of the Word, why is this sense presented to us? Is it to satisfy our curiosity, so we bystanders can look in at the dynamics of the life of God? I don't believe this is its purpose at all. Instead, I submit that this was presented so we might come into the kingdom. If I had to describe Swedenborg's spiritual writings and their fundamental purpose in one line, it would be this: the writings are a clear presentation meant to be used by individuals to lead them into the life of God—as an actual part of their experience. His writings are rational, but that is their style, not preeminently their nature. Their nature and overwhelming purpose are to lead to God, which accounts for many aspects of their structure. So in this sense, not only are his writings the work of a mystic, they are meant to help create mystics, that is, to lead others to the Divine. I am quite in accord with the position of some regarding the sacredness and authority of Swedenborg's writings.

Perhaps a few words on the general nature of mysticism in organized religion may help those to whom the connection of mysticism and Swedenborg's religious writings is new. Mystics, those who have contact with the Divine, have sprung up in all religions, all cultures, and all times. They express themselves variously in the forms and uses

of their time, culture, and religion. Contrary to the outsider's idea that they may depart on any wild whim or intuition, persons with the experience of the Divine tend to be able to recognize this in others even across the barriers of time and circumstances. It is as though, having touched the universal, they can recognize others who have also done so. They tend to be socially useful; and, in fact, their uses may be the only outer expression of their experience of the Divine. Like Swedenborg, they tend to support the old religious forms but give them deeper meaning. It is not appropriate to rank them as to which is the greater mystic, for they are in no contest with each other. Rather we can say, "This one touches me and that one doesn't," which describes our own uniqueness. It is characteristic of mystics that they speak from experience rather than from speculation and past authority. It is often their lot to be seen as a threat to conventional religious authority, which may not dare claim an experience of God. Are mystics rare? Not really. Probably all persons have the experience of the Divine, often in childhood, but people differ in how conscious and ruling this experience is. Included in the scholarly definition is nature mysticism—the feeling of God present in nature—which must be a universal experience.

What is the evidence in Swedenborg's writings that he came into the experience of God? There is an even more critical interior question: what in his writings can lead you to God? To a mystic the signs of Swedenborg's contact with God are too legion to catalog, but I'll deal with the most general first. Throughout his writings, Swedenborg is saying, "I have experienced . . ." This is not said in an aggrandizing way. The whole *Spiritual Diary* contains



his experiences. The “memorable relations” scattered through all of his religious writings are experiences. He makes practically no reference to other scholars or theologians. On a few occasions, he says the internal sense of the Bible was revealed by the Lord alone. No angels or spirits led him in this. Does he mean the Lord dictated the *Arcana Coelestia* word for word? I don’t believe so. It was a noetic, direct-knowing experience. The experience has very pleasant inner verities, so one knows beyond doubt the real author. I am reminded of the phrase somewhere in the Bible that the sheep know their master. I picture a shepherd who lives all day with his sheep and sleeps with them at night. They know his very footsteps and smell. It is that kind of interior familiarity that exists in Swedenborg’s writing.

Secondly, his writings not only come from experience but their real substance deals primarily with *human* experience. It is not as though the Divine and the human are two contents; there is but one content: the Divine/human. Swedenborg’s is an immensely human view of theology. This may not be apparent to everyone. *Heaven and Hell* deals with angels, spirits, and demons. If they are human, don’t they at least seem a bit removed from our world of humans? Not so. We have each experienced something of heaven and hell in this world. While we are in this life, we each participate in societies of heaven and hell. That is, by our very nature, choices, or uses, we are intimately related to aspects of heaven and hell. Moreover, I am struck how heaven and hell can also be understood as deeper aspects of mind. We not only exist by influx through the spiritual worlds, but also our interior design is in their form. For me, it

has been a useful clarification to think how acts of mine and others may be heavenly or hellish.

The interior human aspect is throughout his writings. "Evidently it is these delights that rule the man's thoughts, and the thoughts are nothing apart from them; yet they seem to him to be nothing but thoughts; when, in fact, thoughts are nothing but affections so composed into forms by his life's love as to be presented in light" (*Divine Providence* 199). It took a good deal of close observation to see that thoughts are formed of affections or feelings. The whole of the twelve-volume *Arcana Coelestia* has to do with the Lord's glorification, which is the model for the individual's spiritual development. But Swedenborg isn't merely dealing with the psychology of persons. His is a unique psychology thoroughly pervaded and informed by his spiritual experience. In two words, it is a *spiritual psychology*. Because he is dealing with the very stuff of human existence, what he has to say is ultimately open to empirical test. I don't quite mean it is open to scientific test because science can only deal with what is external. But I do mean it is open to test and confirmation by individuals. My pamphlet on *Uses*<sup>18</sup> is an example of bringing one of Swedenborg's core doctrines into personal experience, where the individual can see for oneself if it is true.

How is it that a boy's early experiences of wonder could eventually teach him to respect Swedenborg? For me, the whole of religion is like a single tree. Religions are branches and the sects are leaves. We can concentrate on the leaves—how this one is different from that one, this finer than that. Or we can look to the one life of the tree. If we concentrate on differences, the whole is impossibly



complex and confusing. As a boy, and now as a man, I badly need to understand the one life of the tree. This brings me the peace of heaven. I find myself in profound accord with a man born three centuries ago, a man who walked in silver buckled shoes and me in Adidas sneakers. He put words to what used to be nameless for me:

Hence it is plain that the church of the Lord is not here, nor there, but that it is everywhere, both within those kingdoms where the church is, and outside them, where men live according to the precepts of charity. Hence it is that the church of the Lord is scattered through the whole world, and yet it is one; for when life makes the church and not doctrine separate them from life, then the church is one, but when doctrine makes the church, then there are many.

(*Arcana Coelestia* 8152)

I have difficulty in answering the question of what religion I belong to. If the questioner is reflective, I answer with surprise, "Do you honestly mean there is more than one?" But to others, I answer simply, "I belong to all religions."

Some will think it must be a life of constant highs to be a mystic. Not so. Much of the time I grumble at my fate and God kicks me. It is sometimes that way with lovers. But it is a respite to wander among Swedenborg's words, touched here and there, and shot through with a wonderful light.

### Notes

1. Thomas Troward, *Edinburgh Lectures in Mental Science* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1909).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

3. Ibid., p. 54.
4. Raymond Moody, *Life After Life* (Atlanta, GA: Mockingbird Books, 1975).
5. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1902), p. 371.
6. Wilson Van Dusen, *Swedenborg's Journal of Dreams* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1986).
7. *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Random House, 1966).
8. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriman, 1942).
9. *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribners, 1961).
10. Herbert Small, "What Is a Mystic?" *The Messenger* (1929): 340.
11. Ibid.
12. Brian Kingslake, "Was Swedenborg a Mystic?" *New Church Magazine* (1977): 52ff.
13. Marguerite Block, *The New Church in the New World* (New York: Octagon, 1968), p. 393.
14. Ibid., p. 400.
15. Wilson Van Dusen, "Another Key to Swedenborg's Development," *New Church Life* (1975): 316-319.
16. Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (New York: Dutton, 1915).
17. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Dutton, 1961).
18. Wilson Van Dusen, *Uses* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1978; rpt. 1987).